

SPECIAL DELEGATE CONFERENCE ON DECENTRALISATION

Burlington Hotel: 1st March 2004

Speech by AHCPS General Secretary Sean O Riordain

Introduction

Chairman, delegates

I have already presented the Executive Committee's Report to Conference and I have been asked, for the formal record, to speak on the Executive motion.

This is an extremely important conference and the theme we have chosen is especially apt:

An opportunity missed and a challenge to meet

In many ways it says it all. Four lost years and where do we go from here?

What we are faced with is the most fundamental relocation of public administration since the foundation of the State. The Government's programme involves the transfer of 10,300 jobs out of Dublin with 70 organisations/work units, in whole or in part, being relocated to 53 locations in 25 counties, with substantial progress to be achieved over a three year period.

The final aim is to increase the job figure to 12,000 and to provide that the creation of all future new agencies will be linked to decentralisation. The figures in human terms are more dramatic. Allowing for spouses, partners, families and dependants of staff potentially moving, about 50 to 60,000 people are involved. If one takes on board the likelihood of substantial churning – transfers across departments of staff staying in Dublin, the numbers of people affected is considerably higher. This will impact on very very many people.

This relocation programme has the potential, if handled carefully over an extended time frame and de-bugged of its extreme elements, to be benevolent and beneficial in the public interest. Equally, if pursued on a "body count" basis to an unrealistic timeframe dictated by election dates, it has the capacity to be destructive of good government.

Association policy

So where do we stand on decentralisation?

The answer is very clear and is set out in the letter which we sent to the Department of Finance on 30 June 2000 by way of a response to the original proposal to decentralise 10,000 public servants signalled by the Minister for Finance in his Budget 2000 speech.

We made it clear that we had no difficulty with a programme of voluntary decentralisation developed in consultation with the public service unions; with locations chosen on a rational public interest basis which would enhance rather than take from administrative efficiency, with removal and relocation expenses paid and which would respect the rights and legitimate career and development requirements of public service staff and organisations.

We asked that the views of Secretaries General of departments as to what could and could not be easily decentralised, having regard to their statutory responsibilities for the management of departments, be factored in and made available to the joint union management working group. Along with the other civil service trade unions, we saw it as critical that a survey be carried out to determine staff interest in decentralisation in advance of deciding on locations.

Given the impact such a massive decentralisation would have economic, social and administrative life we proposed that a Green Paper Discussion Document be published by Government in advance of final decisions.

We believe that this approach was reasonable then and is reasonable now. We recognise the great advantage that a wise decentralisation programme would bring to the provinces and, indeed, to decentralised public servants, and to those who wish to decentralise but, equally, we don't want good government undermined or a public service wasteland created in Dublin.

An opportunity missed

The reality of course, has proven to be different. Our hope that decentralisation might be approached on a rational public interest, rather than what is universally perceived as a political basis has not materialised. The secretive manner in which this decision was taken has sown the seeds of the difficulties that the programme now faces.

The failure to carry out a survey in advance, together with the fact that the majority of locations are neither gateways nor hubs under the National Spatial Strategy, combine to suggest that the programme will be seriously under subscribed so far as the more

remote areas are concerned. All the surveys that have been done officially and by unions in the civil service suggest that in the order of up to only 20% of staff working in business units due to be transferred down the country are willing to move out of Dublin to the new location chosen for that unit. Indeed, the situation may be worse in the State agencies.

The concept of perhaps up to 80% of staff being required to move out with 80% being brought in to each of the seventy units nominated for decentralisation is a recipe for administrative chaos. Look at the corporate memory and skills loss alone. Even with everything going absolutely well, and adopting the ordinary rule of thumb that it takes three moves to actually get one person down the country, over 30,000 interchanges would be required of staff in the public service over the next three years. Obviously, if the overall numbers do not materialise then the situation gets worse. On the one hand, the State has to pay the cost of surplus staff in Dublin and, on the other, they have to replace the staff down the country.

It is truly extraordinary that, in the four years since this announcement was originally made, the opportunity to engage in meaningful consultation, to publish proper costings, to carry out an impact analysis, both in respect of service delivery and of the effect on regional and local development, and to develop a strategic and business planning approach integrated with a realistic human resources policy which would address these important issues, was not taken. From an industrial relations perspective, what has happened is in clear and fundamental breach of Sustaining Progress and makes a mockery of social partnership and, from a business perspective, it is not a model that would recommend itself!

We welcome the assurance that the programme is voluntary but, on the other hand, there is a coercive undertone and the Department of Finance has already unilaterally put a halt on certain Dublin promotions, and staff are extremely worried and uncertain as to how and where their expertise and skills will be used in the context of remaining in Dublin and their jobs going elsewhere. Apart from any other consideration, the age structure and domestic responsibilities of many of our members makes a move out of Dublin impossible and, after a lifetime of service to this State, they now see themselves as pawns in a political game.

A central issue is the potential for substantial surpluses and the real danger, with the locating of all new agencies outside of Dublin, is that our capital city, in which people wish to work and live, will become a public service wasteland. No public service organisation in Dublin will be able to provide a career path. Good staff will not be interested in spending a life here in a demoralised public service and a prime determinant for senior level advancement will be a willingness to serve in a wide selection of dispersed areas.

Service delivery

Turning now to service delivery.

It is clear that fundamental questions also arise as to whether what is proposed makes business sense either from a policy determination or corporate joined up government sense, or from the perspective of delivery of services to principal client and consumer groups.

All of us are conscious of the impossible pressures on Ministerial time and it is difficult for anybody with experience in public administration to believe that a Minister in an office in Dublin and a department at a distance down the country will effectively be able to discharge his/her constitutional responsibilities for the administration of the department. The danger is that the Minister will become an absentee landlord. There is then the likelihood that the gap will be bridged by Ministers in Dublin surrounding themselves with political advisors and spin doctors and consultants, and the important link between senior civil servants and Ministers in relation to development of policy will be broken.

Our Association had a special input, acknowledged and welcomed by successive Taoisigh, into the development of the *Strategic Management Initiative*. As far back as 1994 when it was neither popular or profitable we brought forward proposals for the *Corporate Strategic Reform of the Civil Service*. At the heart of our proposals and at the heart of the *Strategic Management Initiative* is the requirement for closer cooperation across departments and agencies, rather than each operating as an independent republic. The various strategies, policies and activities all need to be better coordinated in the interest of cohesive and effective government. This is happening at present because the policy makers all know each other well and can easily meet and interact face to face at the centre of decision making in Dublin. This will become substantially more difficult if departments and agencies are scattered all over the place.

So much of the policy work of departments requires regular face to face interaction with Ministers, with the Oireachtas, with national bodies, with the EU, with employers, with trades unions, with other representative organisations, with consumer groups, with the public and with senior staff in other departments. With hundreds of interdepartmental committees operating in EU, economic and social areas, including the social partners, central coordination is seriously undermined by what is proposed here.

Networking and regular face-to-face contact with all stakeholders are critical. It is just impossible to see how the policy functions of departments can effectively be discharged at a distance. To even attempt to do it right will require absolutely massive travelling by senior civil servants, and this at a time when we are already striving, with difficulty in the management grades, to advance gender equality and respect work life balance. It will now take days, because of the imposed travel requirement, to do what previously could be done in a morning. And all of this has a substantial cost to the public.

Then there are the service delivery problems created by choice of locations.

It was stated by the Department of Finance at a meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Finance and Public Service in October 2003 that a good business case would drive the choice of locations and that the service would be brought closer to the public. In very many cases, as we have seen from the presentation of the Executive Committee Report, the exact opposite is happening and the public need to be aware that they will be paying more for a reduced service.

The one area where caution has been exercised is in relation to IT. No location has been chosen because, in this case, the prospect of social welfare payments not issuing or the revenue computer collapsing was too daunting. It is vital that no move take place here unless there is absolute certainty, after parallel running, that new arrangements will work. There is also of course a major cost issue that has to be quantified. Incidentally, it is ironic that caution was adopted in this area as if, in all others, public servants are just perceived by Government as interchangeable clerks!

We have been lectured about what private sector organisations do. Can anyone in their right mind imagine a situation where the Board of a private sector organisation would decide to voluntarily decentralise to a substantial number of remote locations, without first carrying out a cost benefit and impact analysis, without surveying staff and without even telling the Chief Executive or Heads of Divisions in advance what was intended. The mind boggles!

But, we are told, e-mail and video conferencing will solve it all; e-Government is the answer. Anybody who knows anything about how the Government itself works will tell you that the item on which most discussions are likely to take place at the Cabinet table is the one entitled *Communications by Ministers*. That's when they raise the real issues and talk freely to each other about what is on their minds, not when they are looking at the formal memoranda for Government. Policy determination invariably requires face-to-face sustained interaction.

A challenge to meet

So where do we go from here?

There are two alternatives. On the one hand, the Government can plough on regardless with the fragmentation and dispersal of the public service. Seek early wins – and we all know that around the perimeter of Dublin and in the major locations – that they will get the numbers, if not the right skills mix. The alternative as outlined in the report to conference is to stand back and take a more considered approach in the public interest. This considered approach is reflected in the Executive Committee motion and common sense would dictate that it should be adopted.

We would dearly wish not to be in this situation but in departments a very simplistic official view is coming across. No one wants to hear the problems or any suggestions that some of the locations chosen do not make sense. We are being solemnly told that this is a political decision (as if that alone conferred godlike wisdom on it) and the role of the civil service is to ensure that it is implemented as quickly as possible.

It is like the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava:

*Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die,
Into the valley of Death
Rode the ten thousand!*

In the real world, however, the dogs on the street are barking that aspects of this decentralisation programme do not make sense. Even the broadsheets are describing it as daft. It is not quite that the Emperor has no clothes. It is just simply that aspects of his policy are threadbare and we would hope that our conference here today will make it easier for staff generally to tell it the way it is and to articulate their concerns within the system.

We have a deep professional and personal interest in what happens and we see ourselves as having a duty of seeking to influence the debate in a manner which will better balance the interests of good government, of local communities and of public servants - those who are already decentralised, those who wish to decentralise and those of our members and other public servants who are anxious and stressed by the manner in which this has been dealt with to date. That is the challenge for us.

The rational way forward is summarised nicely in our Executive Committee Report to Conference:

Neither the Association nor its members take any pleasure in preparing a document such as this. But the situation in which we find ourselves is emphatically not of our own choice, the issues raised are of considerable national importance, and our members consider themselves both professionally and personally obliged to make their voices heard.

What is required now is a return to rationality, common sense, sensitivity, compassion and patience – all characteristics manifestly, and, most regrettably, absent from the details set out in December's announcement.

Making haste slowly might now be an appropriate guiding principle. Initiation, even at this late stage, of the procedures outlined on the previous page (page 25) might be an appropriate new starting point.

I want to say in conclusion that the role of the Association is not to be nice. It is not to be nasty. It is to tell it the way it is; to professionally articulate a vision of effective public service and, as best we can, to protect and advance the rights, interests and legitimate aspirations of our members who spend their lives in the service of this State. This is our responsibility. This is our privilege.

End.